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AUTHOR Neman, Beth S.
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ABSTRACT

Few would disagree that the essential purpose in multicultural studies is to promote compassionate understanding and to diminish hatred. The two basic approaches to this goal, celebrating differences and emphasizing unity, are suggested by Maya Angelou in her poem, "The Human Family." Most university courses do a good job of honoring differences, but they succeed less well in bringing students to an understanding of the more fundamental ways in which "we are more alike, my friends, than we are unalike." In fact, it could be argued that students end up with the mind set of the English child in Robert Louis Stevenson's "Foreign Children," who is fascinated by the quaint and interesting children he has heard of all over the world but who carefully draws a line between "them" and "us." It is the idea of otherness--of "them" and "us"--that permits people to persecute fellow human beings as the Nazis did. And as long as that separation between "them" and "us" exists, it does not matter if "they" have interesting customs, as long as "they" are not "us," "we" can do "them" in with impunity. However, if comprehending individuals as "them" can justify hatred, then identifying people on the basis of their underlying humanity can unite "them" in "our own us." And as Angelou points out, this underlying unity exists throughout the human family. (TB)

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Translating Maya Angelou's theme, "We are more alike, my friends/Than we are unalike," into Effective Multicultural Study.

Few would disagree that our essential purpose in multicultural studies is to promote compassionate understanding and to diminish hatred. There are two basic approaches to this goal: celebrating differences and emphasizing unity. Maya Angelou suggests both of these approaches in her poem, "The Human Family:"

I note the obvious differences
in the human family.
Some of us are serious
some thrive on comedy.

Some declare their lives are lived
as true profundity,
and others claim they really live
the real reality.

The variety of our skin tones
can confuse, bemuse, delight,
brown and pink and beige and purple,
tan and blue and white.

I've sailed upon the seven seas
and stopped in every land,
I've seen the wonders of the world,
not yet one common man.

I know ten thousand women
called Jane and May Jane,
but I've not seen any two
who really were the same.

Mirror twins are different
although their features jibe,
and lovers think quite different thoughts
while lying side by side.

We love and lose in China,
we weep on England's moors,
and laugh and moan in Guinea,
and thrive on Spanish shores.

We seek success in Finland,
are born and die in Maine.
In minor ways we differ,
in major we're the same.

I note the obvious differences
between each sort and type,
but we are more alike, my friends,
than we are unalike.

We are more alike, my friends,
than we are unalike.

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We are more alike, my friends,
than we are unalike.

I think most of us would endorse Maya Angelou's poem as a fair expression of our goals in courses with a multicultural focus. We do a good job of honoring differences in these courses. But we succeed less well in bringing our students to an understanding of the more fundamental ways in which "we are more alike, my friends, than we are unalike."

In fact, I would even argue that often our students end up with the mind set of the English child in Robert Louis Stevenson's "Foreign Children," who is fascinated by the quaint and interesting children he's heard of all over the world, but who carefully draws a line between "Them" and "Us."

Little Indian, Sioux or Crow,
Little frosty Eskimo,
Little Turk or Japanee,
Oh, don't you wish that you were me?

You have seen the scarlet trees,
and the lions overseas,
You have eaten ostrich eggs,
And turned the turtles off their legs.

Such a life is very fine,
But it's not so nice as mine.
You must often as you trod
Have wearied not to be abroad.

You have curious things to eat;
I am fed on proper meat.
You must dwell beyond the foam;
But I am safe and life at home.

Little Indian, Sioux or Crow,
Little frosty Eskimo,
Little Turk or Japanee,
Oh, don't you wish that you were me?

If students in our multicultural programs end up appreciating the interesting ways the studied culture is different from their own but still continue to consider its people "the other," a group separate from themselves, we have failed to meet our goals. For it is the notion of "the other" that causes all the problems.

The differences that invoke this idea can be minuscule. For instance, a colleague of mine tells the story of some relatives of hers in Sicily who went into mourning because their son married an outsider--a girl from an almost identical Sicilian Catholic village that happened to be located ten miles down the road behind the next hill. But to these parents, she and her fellow villagers were the "Other," creatures from a different species.

It is the idea of otherness--of them and us--that permits people to lynch their fellow humans or to gas them in ovens. And as long as that separation of them and us exists, it doesn't matter much if THEY have interesting customs--even "eat[ing] ostrich eggs [or] turn[ing] turtles off their legs"--as long as THEY are not US, we can do them in with impunity.

Hitler, for example, collected the artifacts of the ancient Jewish community of Prague for a museum that was to commemorate this "interesting," and--by then intended to be--defunct, civilization. When an exhibit of some of these artifacts came to America, I had the opportunity to view them. There were family portraits, table linens, silverware, china and pottery--all confiscated from homes of those sent to the gas chambers. There were religious objects--the Sabbath candlesticks a family gathered around on Friday night, hand-embroidered altar cloths for the synogogue, hand-painted marriage contracts. I especially remember a series of sculpture-relief plaques sequentially reviewing the duties of a medieval Burial Society with participants realistically, if rather primitively, portrayed.

The Nazis wanted their museum to point up how different and INTERERESTING the Prague Jews were with all their INTERESTING artifacts and INTERESTING funerary and Sabbath customs. But their anthropological interest did nothing to diffuse the Nazis' murderous intent and they put six million of this people with all their INTERESTING DIFFERENCES to death.

Wartime propagandists understand the importance of creating a gulf between nice, normal US and strange and different THEM, so that people can overcome their natural feelings against violence and destruction when it is directed at THEM; and military trainers must dehumanize the enemy to turn soldier boys into fighting men. Perhaps you've seen the World War II-era caricatures of the Japanese or Gulf War-era cartoons of Arabs, designed to turn people into enemies.

But, on the other hand, if comprehending individuals as THEM can justify hatred, then identifying with people on the basis of their underlying humanity can unite them in our own US, a unity that makes categorical malice unthinkable. Simply put, it is difficult to hate or harm those we see as being a good deal like ourselves.

And, as Maya Angelou points out, this underlying unity exists throughout the human family--even when the external cultures are totally disparate. This truth was brought home to me in a very personal way last spring when I had the opportunity to visit American friends in Cairo, Egypt.

My friend Yvonne and I were riding on the women's car of the public transit train and had been lucky enough to find seats when a heavily veiled young woman, dressed all in black from head to foot with only her eyes showing through two narrow slits--even her hands covered in sheer black gloves--carried her baby on to our car and stood in front of me. The baby, of course, was adorable. When I waved my fingers and cooed something at it, the baby responded, and a girlish giggle emerged from out of the heavy veils. Soon the mother took the baby's little hand and waved it back at me and we three were caught up in the universal game of playing and loving and mothering.

And though we differed in every imaginable way--in geography, language, religion, values, philosophy, economics, education, culture--she in her Islamic chador and I in my academic tweeds, we came together for a few moments in perfect human communication. To fulfill the real multicultural purpose of our teaching, we need to help our students identify with the people of other cultures on this deeply human level.

This talk served as an introduction to the other workshop speakers. It posed the problem; the others offered practical strategies for overcoming it.

I concluded with the following:

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The task is not as difficult as it would seem because, as Margaret Early discovered in her cognitive developmental research, late adolescents have a developmental need to find a path for themselves--a personal direction--in what they read and study. They thus can be guided into a conscious assumption of human oneness, based on their personal identification with the people they study--even those of different cultures, races, religions, or sexes.

For practical ways of helping our students to this sort of identification, I turn you to my colleagues.

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In summary, they included:

- a literature specialist, who demonstrated how students can come to identify with the protagonists of such works as The Invisible Man or Brighton Beach Memoirs and write analyses of these works from that point of view.

- a linguist with extensive experience in inmate education, who endorsed bidialectism as a pragmatic way both to celebrate difference and identify with the culture of others.

- and a professor of religion/philosophy, who took his examples from a comparative religion course where he encourages students to explore similarities and differences. He explained how he can accede to his students overwhelming preference for probing similarities without either neglecting the essential theological differences or cheapening obvious similarities through overemphasis. His strategy is to focus discussion and writing assignments on the mystical tradition common to all faiths.